

# Transcript: Australia/Sunday Program

DATE: September 22, 2002

"Silent Witnesses"



## Transcript of Australian Channel 9 Sunday Program

**The Catholic and Anglican churches in Australia are already engulfed in the scandal of child abuse. *Sunday* has managed to get inside the Jehovah's Witnesses, and found the WTS has secretly pursued a policy of obstructing police investigations into child abusers.**

Aired September 22, 2002

GRAHAM DAVIS, REPORTER: At the Melbourne Tennis Centre, the gods of sport make way for the real thing, as 10,000 voices praise the almighty. These are just some of the 60,000 or so Australians who belong to the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, better known as the Jehovah's Witnesses.

PREACHER: We need to be zealous as proclaimers of God's kingdom, shining as illuminators of the world.

REPORTER: They're the clean-cut evangelists who appear at our doors, preaching Armageddon and the paradise to come for true believers.

PREACHER: Call back on everyone who shows even the slightest interest, even if we've just left them with a tract.

REPORTER: Yet as we'll see, the shepherds, as church leaders portray themselves, have created a hell on earth for some of the most vulnerable of their flock and they're outlaws in the classic sense, having placed themselves outside the laws that protect children from sexual predators. When it finally dawned on you that what you were witnessing was a policy of covering up child abuse, how did you feel about them?

NATALIE WEBB, CHILD ABUSE VICTIM: Devastated. Disappointed. Angry.

REPORTER: Today, victims like Natalie Webb speak out for the first time, accusing the church of covering up the crimes against them. She was abused by her own father, Victor, an outwardly respectable member of the Benteleigh congregation in suburban Melbourne.

NATALIE WEBB: My earliest memory is having a bath with my father and he was touching me, and from other things around me, I realised that I would have been about four.

REPORTER: Four years old?

NATALIE WEBB: Four, yep.

REPORTER: And how long did the abuse go on for?

NATALIE WEBB: Till I was... just turned 17.

REPORTER: 17?

NATALIE WEBB: Mmm-hmm.

REPORTER: And presumably it progressed from...

NATALIE WEBB: Just touching to intercourse, penetration.

REPORTER: Natalie lived with her terrible secret until she was married - her father beaming like any other on her wedding day. Then, unable to bear it any longer, she told her story to this church elder, Maurice Hadley. Was there any suggestion whatsoever that the police be informed?

NATALIE WEBB: None at all. The opposite, actually. Maurice said to me that the authorities shouldn't be notified because it would be a bad witness and that they would be able to handle the situation.

REPORTER: So Maurice Hadley told you quite specifically not to go to the police?

NATALIE WEBB: Yes, yes, and no psychiatrists or psychologists either for me because I was having difficulties.

REPORTER: Why did he ban psychiatrists or psychologists from seeing you?

NATALIE WEBB: Because they're worldly and they are possibly Satanic and could fill my head with rubbish.

REPORTER: Incredibly, Natalie's story is the norm, not the exception, for child abuse victims in the Jehovah's Witnesses. Simon Thomas was 12 when he fell prey to this man, Robert Souter, of the Corrimal congregation on the NSW south coast. Even when Souter admitted his crimes to church elders, he was allowed to continue as a Jehovah's Witness. He also continued to molest other children. Was there any suggestion that anybody go to the police over this?

SIMON THOMAS, CHILD ABUSE VICTIM: No, none at all. My parents spoke to elders locally, they spoke to travelling overseers, and they were told that they shouldn't go to the police and the best thing to do would be to keep the congregation clean, not say anything, pray more and leave it to Jehovah.

REPORTER: How can you keep the congregation clean by keeping quiet and covering up something like this, when the person who's unclean is allowed back in?

SIMON THOMAS: Well, I don't know. I don't know.

REPORTER: Today, some disturbing answers, clear evidence that the Watchtower Society routinely tries to pervert the course of justice in child abuse cases by obstructing police investigations.

JIM DONALD, FORMER ELDER: Well, this is my copy of an elders' book and these are my handwritten notes taken down at the dictation from the circuit overseer.

REPORTER: Jim Donald is a former church elder now blowing the whistle on his fellow brothers with details of an edict so sensitive, it was never committed to paper.

JIM DONALD: This was a letter to all bodies of elders.

REPORTER: And it says here "child abuse confidential". What is it telling us there?

JIM DONALD: It's saying to us here "If interviewed by social workers or police or other authorities, "do not reveal if a confession has been made. "Contact society immediately."

REPORTER: So if a child ab user has said, "Yes, I did it", you're not to tell the police that?

JIM DONALD: No, not at all.

REPORTER: Do you think that's obstruction?

JIM DONALD: Obviously. Obviously.

REPORTER: Jim Donald is a Justice of the Peace who once spread Jehovah's word as a church elder in the northern NSW town of Glen Innes . Now he confines himself to spreading news of worldly matters on his paper round, having abandoned the church four years ago.

JIM DONALD: We were to resist every approach by the authorities to willingly give over any information.

REPORTER: And you knew, did you, that that was the agenda, that you were not to cooperate?

JIM DONALD: Absolutely. You see, every instance like that is to be seen as an attack against pure worship and against Jehovah's name, and so what they call theocratic warfare is to take place.

REPORTER: Theocratic warfare?

JIM DONALD: Yes.

REPORTER: What does that mean?

JIM DONALD: That means we are in a battle situation.

REPORTER: With the police? With the State?

JIM DONALD: With the State.

ANDY FARRELL, FORMER MEMBER: They have a phrase they refer to which is theocratic warfare, and that is basically that it's acceptable to lie or to cover over things if it's for the good of God's purpose.

REPORTER: Andy Farrell left the Jehovah's Witnesses five years ago after a lifetime's association.

ANDY FARRELL: They won't condone breaking the law where it's a more black and white issue, say it was a murder case or something like that, but there are certainly a lot of problems of a lesser scale that the church tries to deal with internally that probably belong in a court of law.

REPORTER: Child abuse?

ANDY FARRELL: Yeah, exactly.

REPORTER: You've written here "search warrants and subpoenas". Now, what did they tell you?

JIM DONALD: They may make a forced entry into the hall. So we were encouraged to stand in front of the door and not to willingly open the door for them.

REPORTER: Officially, the church denies all knowledge of the concept of theocratic warfare, but Jim Donald's account of the verbal instruction not to cooperate with police was confirmed to Sunday by another former elder, though he wouldn't be filmed. There's nothing on paper, right?

JIM DONALD: No.

REPORTER: Nothing on paper at all?

JIM DONALD: No.

REPORTER: Do you think this is because their legal department would have known they might have a problem with this in the future?

JIM DONALD: Oh, I think so, yeah.

REPORTER: Because they've got a big problem with this, haven't they?

JIM DONALD: Absolutely, yes.

REPORTER: And the man who was once the society's own lawyer agrees.

REV WARRYN STUCKEY, FORMER WATCHTOWER SOCIETY LAWYER: I think it can have the practical effect of perverting the course of justice.

REPORTER: It could?

REV WARRYN STUCKEY: It could have that practical effect.

REV WARRYN STUCKEY ADDRESSING CHURCH: Let's commence our service by singing together our first hymn number 673 - 'There is a redeemer'.

REPORTER: The Reverend Warryn Stuckey has left behind the law and the Jehovah's Witnesses to become an Anglican priest. It was a short journey physically, for his church is a stone's throw from the Watchtower's Sydney headquarters. But in personal and theological terms, his was a momentous defection and as a former elder and director of Watchtower companies, he's a potent witness against his former associates.

REV WARRYN STUCKEY: I could imagine that if it was a case of any other crime, like murder or something, that there would be full cooperation and why in this case there is not suggests that there is something that they're protecting.

REPORTER: Protecting the church's reputation or even protecting child ab user s perhaps?

REV WARRYN STUCKEY: Or particular child ab user s.

REPORTER: The Jehovah's Witnesses, in fact, routinely shield paedophiles from the law - as in the case of Robert Souter, allowing them to offend again and again. It's been called a 'paedophile paradise'. Would you agree with that?

JIM DONALD: Yeah, I've heard that, yes.

REPORTER: Would you agree with that?

JIM DONALD: Yes.

REPORTER: You would?

JIM DONALD: Yes.

REPORTER: Paedophile paradise?

ANDY FARRELL: Yes.

REPORTER: You'd agree with that?

ANDY FARRELL: I think that's true.

REPORTER: So this was the body of the Kingdom Hall here?

SIMON THOMAS: Yes.

REPORTER: And in the greatest betrayal of all, far from suffering the little children, the church has inflicted untold suffering that lingers into adulthood.

SIMON THOMAS: I remember that the first time he actually touched me and did something to me, I just - that was a real life-changing moment. It was terrible. I just knew it would never be the same after that.

REPORTER: For years, Simon Thomas has privately nursed the hurt of a blighted childhood at the Kingdom Hall. Now he wants his story told of how the church protected his ab user , Robert Souter.

SIMON THOMAS: It was supposed to be a really nice, safe place, but it wasn't for me or a lot of other kids.

REPORTER: You now know, don't you, that after Souter was abusing you, he was abusing a whole host of others?

SIMON THOMAS: Yes.

REPORTER: How many?

SIMON THOMAS: I know of 10 personally, but the police that I've spoken to have said there's around 40.

REPORTER: 40 others?

SIMON THOMAS: That they know of.

REPORTER: After you?

SIMON THOMAS: After me.

REPORTER: If the church had listened to the pleas that you were making, how many of those kids could have been saved?

SIMON THOMAS: Well, all of them, I think.

REPORTER: All of them - 40 kids?

SIMON THOMAS: I think all of the m c ould have been saved.

REPORTER: Ingleburn, south-west Sydney , the Watchtower's Bethel or House of God, its sprawling Australian headquarters. More than 300 people live and work on this site, that includes a publishing arm printing Watchtower material in 70 languages. In the legal department here, every instance of child abuse known to the church is carefully filed away, but it's not reported to the authorities. The church regards such cases as confidential. So, just how many child ab user s are there on the files in there? Well, the church tells us pointedly, it's none of our business. But at every turn in this investigation we came across victims unwilling to speak out, not because of their ab user s, but because of the church - fearful of losing their friends, even their families. The church calls it "Keeping the congregation clean". Not of paedophiles, but of anything that damages the Watchtower's reputation. How do you think you're going to be treated by the church from now on?

SIMON THOMAS: I don't know. It's yet to be seen. But I would rather say something than to just be quiet and wait any longer.

REPORTER: Surprisingly, Simon still counts himself a witness, whereas Natalie Webb has left the church behind, unable to come to terms with the blind eye it turned to her father's depravity.

NATALIE WEBB: Because my dad wanted me to have sex with animals and have lesbian liaisons and like all these things.

REPORTER: And you told them that?

NATALIE WEBB: Oh yeah, yeah, they knew, and they said "We don't need to know details to make a decision. We're being guided by God".

PREACHER: Jehovah, our God of love, we come before your lofty throne and ask that we can be heard by you.

REPORTER: But before we examine these cases in detail, some understanding is needed of what sets the Jehovah's Witnesses apart, what makes their critics doubt they'll ever be shamed into reform by the kind of allegations that have forced changes in the mainstrea m c hurches, like the Anglicans and Roman Catholics. Is there any chance whatsoever that this organisation can reform itself?

REV WARRYN STUCKEY: No.

REPORTER: None?

REV WARRYN STUCKEY: None.

REPORTER: So if there's going to be any reform of their handling of child abuse, it's going to have to be imposed on them?

REV WARRYN STUCKEY: Yes.

REPORTER: To Jehovah's Witnesses, there's only one true religion - theirs. Jehovah God, the only God, his word in the Bible to be taken literally. The act of baptism through total immersion symbolises total surrender to Jehovah and his only legitimate authority on earth, the Watchtower Society. Witnesses live in what they call "the truth", the rest of us in "the world", a world the church would have it governed by Satan.

PREACHER: If you decide you want to do some of your own thing, well, you can. But be careful, because this world is deceived. It's deceived by the Devil.

REPORTER: And Satan's temptations abound, even across a crowded room. Jehovah's Witnesses aren't allowed to marry outside the church, a source of much heartache in itself. What were the circumstances that led to you leaving?

JIM DONALD: I attended a son's wedding.

REPORTER: Your own son?

JIM DONALD: My own son, yeah.

REPORTER: What was wrong with that?

JIM DONALD: Well, he was marrying a young lass who was an Anglican. Now, all other churches are considered as children of the Devil. So they said - and I quote from the man who was the branch coordinator at the time - "You don't give your children to the Philistines."

REPORTER: But the strictures go on. Jehovah's Witnesses can't vote, can't join the military, aren't allowed to celebrate Christmas, even their own birthdays.

ANDY FARRELL: Birthdays because they see it as bringing too much attention to a single person. With Christmas, I think everybody understands that a lot of the symbolism associated with Christmas obviously isn't Christian, it's come from other practices around the world and they use that as part of their justification.

REPORTER: And most controversial of all, Jehovah's Witnesses can't have blood transfusions, a dictate based on an obscure biblical passage that's cost many thousands of lives worldwide.

REV WARRYN STUCKEY: I was 18 at the time, my brother was 20. He shot himself in the next room. Um, he shot himself in the head. We rushed in there, he was bleeding from every - you know, from his ears, his nose, everything. My first thought, I said to my parents "Whatever you do, don't let them give him a blood transfusion".

REPORTER: So you'd been brainwashed?

REV WARRYN STUCKEY: I had been brainwashed. That is what I thought, he mustn't have a blood transfusion. Here's my brother dying in front of me, and that was my first thought.

REPORTER: Your priority.

REV WARRYN STUCKEY: My priority.

REPORTER: How do you feel about that?

REV WARRYN STUCKEY: Oh, on the verge of tears now as I think about it. It was just so callous, so... yeah, that's what the religion does.

REPORTER: Bad stuff.

REV WARRYN STUCKEY: Bad stuff. Bad stuff.

SIMON THOMAS: Some of it actually here inside the hall...

REPORTER: And then there's the child abuse, all the elements of exploitation, betrayal and cover-up present in the saga of what happened to Simon Thomas. He actually molested you inside the church itself?

SIMON THOMAS: Inside the Kingdom Hall, yeah, yep.

REPORTER: Amazing.

SIMON THOMAS: It is, looking back it was amazing.

REPORTER: And equally amazing, Natalie Webb's story. Her father's abuse compounded by the callous indifference of church leaders when it was brought to their attention. You must have been devastated?

NATALIE WEBB: Well, I tried to take my own life a few weeks later because I couldn't cope with it, mm.

REPORTER: So you tried to commit suicide?

NATALIE WEBB: Mm.

REPORTER: As a result of that, did you get any help at all from them?

NATALIE WEBB: I got a counselling session from them saying that it was due to me not forgiving my father, that's why I wasn't coping.

SIMON THOMAS: Well, I was told that to endure until the end is a... is to be faithful. It demonstrates your faith. And I was also told to leave it to Jehovah because Jehovah will work it out, but why can't we expose these things that are happening and then leave it to Jehovah?

REPORTER: In part two, the shocking details of these cover-ups. Yeah, I just wanted to talk to you about the sex abuse case involving Natalie Webb. And we confront the elders, who in Jehovah's name and with the church's backing, kept the authorities at bay. Do you recall telling her that she shouldn't go to the police?

MAURICE HADLEY, CHURCH ELDER: Not at all.

REPORTER: She says you did?

MAURICE HADLEY: Well, that's her word against mine, isn't it?

REPORTER: Like many victims of child abuse, Natalie Webb kept her secret into adulthood, but at the age of 26, she could cope no longer. It was her husband who finally brought matters to a head.

NATALIE WEBB: He rang up my father and said, "We can't live with this anymore. It has to come out in the open. "I'll give you a week to go to the elders."

REPORTER: But Victor Webb wasn't about to confess, so he was exposed. OK, so your husband goes to the elders. Which elder did he go and see?

NATALIE WEBB: Maurice Hadley.

MAURICE HADLEY: Maurice Hadley, yes, I'm Maurice Hadley.

REPORTER: Hi - Graham Davis from the Sunday program. I just wanted talk to you about the sex abuse case involving Natalie Webb.

MAURICE HADLEY: Oh, right.

REPORTER: You know her father?

MAURICE HADLEY: Well, indeed I do.

REPORTER: You used to play tennis with him, didn't you?

MAURICE HADLEY: (Laughs) Where did you get all this information?

REPORTER: Well, we have our sources. Do you still have any contact with Vic?

MAURICE HADLEY: Oh, occasionally.

REPORTER: What did Maurice Hadley say to him?

NATALIE WEBB: Um well, he was very shocked and couldn't believe it.

REPORTER: Because your father had been so devout?

NATALIE WEBB: And they were quite friendly.

REPORTER: What do you think about what he did to his daughter?

MAURICE HADLEY: Oh, I think it's deplorable. Absolutely disgusting.

REPORTER: Why had...

MAURICE HADLEY: And I have never ever condoned that man's behaviour.

REPORTER: As senior elder at the local Kingdom Hall, Maurice Hadley formed a judicial committee, the way the church deals with all breaches of its code of behaviour, from smoking a cigarette, through to serious crimes.

NATALIE WEBB: There were three elders, including him, in that committee. And they apparently - so Maurice told me - spoke to Bethel in Sydney and decided among themselves that no-one should know about it, it should be a private reproof.

REPORTER: So, for sexually abusing his daughter from the age of four, a crime he readily admitted, all Victor Webb got was a reprimand behind closed doors. A private reproof?

NATALIE WEBB: A private, yep so, and then he would be put on a course of bible studies, because that's what was wrong with him - spiritually he was sick, so he was told.

REPORTER: At the very least, Natalie Webb had wanted her father disfellowshipped - expelled from the congregation - the ultimate sanction for Jehovah's Witnesses. It didn't happen. Why didn't the elders of the church disfellowship him for what he did?

MAURICE HADLEY: Why didn't they?

REPORTER: Yep. Why didn't YOU?

MAURICE HADLEY: Well, I'm not the decision maker.

REPORTER: You were.

MAURICE HADLEY: No, no, I was only one of them - I was a committee - part of the committee at the time.

REPORTER: Can you tell me why he wasn't disfellowshipped?

MAURICE HADLEY: Well, not now I can't.

NATALIE WEBB: I'd believed all my life that when you do something wrong, you get disfellowshipped, and I guess I went a little bit crazy and I just couldn't work it out.

REPORTER: A secret deliberation, a private reproof, no recourse whatsoever to the proper authorities. Did you go to the police?

MAURICE HADLEY: ..which is a reasonable - no, I didn't.

REPORTER: Why not?

MAURICE HADLEY: Well, it was something for the family to decide and do.

NATALIE WEBB: Maurice said to me that the authorities shouldn't be notified because it would be a bad witness and that they would be able to handle the situation.

REPORTER: So Maurice Hadley told you quite specifically...

NATALIE WEBB: Mmm-hmm, yes.

REPORTER: ..not to go to the police?

NATALIE WEBB: Yes.

MAURICE HADLEY: Yeah, and I say that that's not true.

REPORTER: You swear by that?

MAURICE HADLEY: I swear by that categorically.

REPORTER: You never said that to her?

MAURICE HADLEY: Never said that to her.

REPORTER: Yet here's something that lends weight to Natalie's claim - a letter from her mother to Maurice Hadley and the other elders in 1997 -

"Your inability and reluctance to deal with the police shows we would have been waiting forever."

REPORTER: By now, the family had had enough and had gone to the police themselves.

NATALIE WEBB: Because I'd never had any dealings with the police, I was very apprehensive, but they were just the most compassionate, wonderful lot of people, and I was so surprised. I got more caring and concern from them than I did from any elder. Genuine caring.

REPORTER: Victor Webb pleaded guilty in the Victoria County Court to eight counts of indecent assault and seven counts of incest. He was sent to jail for 10 years, but the church elders supported the criminal, not his victim.

NATALIE WEBB: They sent three representatives from the congregation to be with Dad, yep, and...

REPORTER: During the trial?

NATALIE WEBB: During the trial, and no-one was sent for me, and in fact, they ignored us when we walked into the court, they wouldn't even speak to us. I guess they thought I was Satanic or heading down that way, yeah.

REPORTER: But the real evil-doer is still being supported behind bars. You go and see him in jail?

MAURICE HADLEY: I visit him periodically.

REPORTER: So you go and see him in prison?

MAURICE HADLEY: About twice a year.

REPORTER: And why do you do that?

MAURICE HADLEY: Why do I do it?

REPORTER: Mm.

MAURICE HADLEY: Well, don't you believe that people can change?

REPORTER: Even now, Victor Webb hasn't been disfellowshipped, though the private reproof became a public reproof when the police became involved.

MAURICE HADLEY: Yes, before all onlookers, other members of the congregation were advised of his situation so that parents could, if they chose to, take precautionary steps to avoid situations that might compromise their children.

REPORTER: And that was it. How do you feel about the church now?

NATALIE WEBB: Mm, um... I'm still very disappointed. The more I hear, I just am so saddened that it's so endemic and everywhere. It's very saddening.

REPORTER: And there are other cover-ups in the church that have had even more serious consequences, allowing paedophiles to offend again and again. What happened to Simon Thomas is, by any measure, a shocking indictment of the Jehovah's Witnesses and their wilful disregard of the secular law. Now this is where he brought you or followed you quite a bit, wasn't it?

SIMON THOMAS: Yep.

REPORTER: We're back at the place where, aged just 12, Simon first encountered his abuser, Robert Souter.

SIMON THOMAS: You know, he'd touch and feel and he'd laugh about it or he'd give me a clip around the ear, give me a good whack, and...

REPORTER: Just to make sure you went along with him?

SIMON THOMAS: ..just to make sure I, yeah. And then he'd go back up inside.

REPORTER: And then there were the bible study sessions at Robert Souter's home.

SIMON THOMAS: Probably the worst of what happened to me happened here at this house.

REPORTER: And we're talking about extreme abuse?

SIMON THOMAS: Yeah, extreme, yeah, extreme abuse. At first it was almost surreal. It was like it wasn't happening, but I was afraid to say anything. It's just the usual - I was just afraid because I didn't want my parents to be upset and I didn't want the congregation to be upset, I didn't want bad things said about Jehovah's Witnesses, so I basically just...

REPORTER: Kept it to yourself?

SIMON THOMAS: ..kept it to myself, copped it on the chin.

REPORTER: For how long? SIMON THOMAS: For about three years.

REPORTER: Then one night, a shocking revelation. When Simon's younger brother has a nervous breakdown on a church trip to the NT.

SIMON THOMAS: He phoned my parents to tell them that he'd been abused by Robert Souter, and it was horrific, the situation was terrible. So my father approached one of the elders and said, "Look, Robert Souter has done this and this and this to my son." So the elder said, "OK, we'll take care of it." And I'd heard this, obviously, and I approached the elder that my father spoke to and I said, "Look, my brother's telling the truth because it's also happened to me."

REPORTER: Can you tell me the name of that elder?

SIMON THOMAS: That elder that we spoke to at that time was John Wingate.

REPORTER: John Wingate?

JOHN WINGATE, CHURCH ELDER: That's right.

REPORTER: Yeah, I'm Graham Davis from the Sunday program at Channel 9. I just wanted to talk to you about Robert Souter and the abuse of the Thomas boys in Wollongong.

JOHN WINGATE: No comment.

REPORTER: The boys first came to you, didn't they, the family first came to you?

JOHN WINGATE: No comment.

REPORTER: Well, Simon Thomas has told us that, so we know that. John Wingate is still an elder of the Cooma congregation in southern NSW, where Robert Souter had moved and we now know, had begun abusing children at the Kingdom Hall there. What did Wingate say to you?

SIMON THOMAS: Well, he said - he seemed to take it very seriously and he said, "Look." He said, "We'll chase it up and leave it with me." And that was the last we heard of it.

REPORTER: You said to him, "Leave it with me." He says that's the last he heard of it. Did you feel that you had any responsibility to get back to this family.

JOHN WINGATE: I have no comment to make to you. No, I have no comment to make to you.

REPORTER: Unbeknown to the family, John Wingate and the other elders did act. They disfellowshipped Robert Souter, expelled him from the congregation. But it wasn't long before the Thomas family got some devastating news.

SIMON THOMAS: It was around about the six months and they reinstated him into the Cooma congregation.

REPORTER: What did you think when you were told that?

SIMON THOMAS: I couldn't believe it. I was stunned and I was unbelievably upset.

REPORTER: Now, what that family wants to know is why he was reinstated into the church around six months later?

JOHN WINGATE: Ring the Watchtower Society of Australia and they'll answer all your questions regarding that situation.

REPORTER: Well, can you tell me, sir, why you...

JOHN WINGATE: I cannot make comments on it.

REPORTER: Why can't you speak about it?

JOHN WINGATE: Because I'm not at liberty to.

REPORTER: Why?

JOHN WINGATE: Because I'm not.

REPORTER: You handled the case.

JOHN WINGATE: That's none of your business.

SIMON THOMAS: I spoke to an elder down there and he said Robert Souter was repentant so when you're repentant, you're allowed back into the congregation.

JOHN WINGATE: Do you have a problem with hearing? Do you have a hearing impediment? I just told you...

REPORTER: I'm trying to find some answers.

JOHN WINGATE: You're not going to get answers off me because I've told you...

REPORTER: So in the absence of any answers from the elders, let's look at the Watchtower's guidelines for dealing with child abuse -

"When a judicial committee determines that a child molester is repentant and will remain a member of the Christian congregation, it would be appropriate to speak to him very frankly, strongly urging him as to the dangers of hugging or holding children on his lap."

REPORTER: I mean, what sort of a deterrent is that?

JIM DONALD: (Laughs) Well, it's none, obviously, because those sorts of things would be just, what would be in public view. The thing that escapes the society's viewpoint on this child molesting situation is that all of this takes place in secret.

REPORTER: So secret is child abuse that Simon Thomas thought he was alone in being abused by Robert Souter, until he found out about his younger brother and then later, about another brother as well. Did you have any sense of guilt that you might have

been able to save your two brothers?

SIMON THOMAS: I did, from then on, and I still have that feeling. And it's part of the reason why I'm doing what I'm doing today. Because if I'd said something back then, I could have saved - I could have helped, maybe in some way, dozens of others.

REPORTER: But maybe not. For in the most extraordinary dictate of all, the Jehovah's Witnesses rulebook insists on this - "There must be two or three eyewitnesses, not just persons repeating what they have heard. No action can be taken if there is only one witness."

REPORTER: Blind Freddy knows that a child ab user doesn't sit around waiting for two or three witnesses before doing anything.

JIM DONALD: That's correct.

REPORTER: How is it that this escapes the elders of the church?

JIM DONALD: They rely on a biblical text which says that all matters are to be established on the mouth of two or three witnesses.

REPORTER: As Jim Donald tells it, this rule has stifled the plaintive cries of victims time and time again and was a major factor in his decision to leave the church behind for good.

JIM DONALD: A young lass made allegations that this particular individual had interfered with her sexual organs. Yeah.

REPORTER: And you were given the job of investigating...

JIM DONALD: Yes.

REPORTER: ..this allegation? What happened?

JIM DONALD: Well, all we could do is pose the questions .

REPORTER: To him?

JIM DONALD: To him, and obviously he said, "Oh, no, no, that's all a mistake and she's had problems. And you know, she comes from a weird family," sort of thing.

REPORTER: So in the absence of the church's rule that there be at least two or three witnesses, this girl was not to be believed?

JIM DONALD: That's right.

REPORTER: And that was the end of the matter?

JIM DONALD: Yep.

REPORTER: But for her father's confession, that's just what would have happened to Natalie Webb. If he'd denied it and it was only your word against him, because of the two witness rule, nothing would have happened. Is that fair to assume?

NATALIE WEBB: That's correct.

SIMON THOMAS: This one's called 'The Wrestle'. It's actually wrestling with a decision on whether I should actually go to the police.

REPORTER: For Simon Thomas, years went by, as he and his family nursed their trauma - black years chronicled in his paintings.

SIMON THOMAS: This one there, that's called 'Life at 15'.

REPORTER: Then, six years ago, Simon approached the church elders again.

SIMON THOMAS: And I said to the elders there that I was really struggling with what happened to me and that I needed some help. I wasn't coping.

REPORTER: And what did they say to you?

SIMON THOMAS: They said to me back then, they said - and these are the exact words - They said, "Obviously for this problem to be bothering you "for so long, "you're not praying enough."

REPORTER: You're kidding?

SIMON THOMAS: That's exactly what was said to me, so I shut up again for another year or two.

REPORTER: And then?

SIMON THOMAS: And then I decided that I was going to go to the police.

REPORTER: Robert Souter was sent to jail for a minimum of three years by Judge John Goldring, who had this to say about the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society -

"The church authorities took it upon themselves to act as if they were the civil authorities which they had no right to do. This matter was not reported to the police, as it should have been and I am surprised that the police have not taken any action against the church authorities. I hope they will do so. The State has responsibility of protecting young people and all citizens have a serious moral responsibility to assist it in doing so. I cannot criticise the church sufficiently seriously for not having reported this matter".

REPORTER: Do you feel any moral responsibility for the fact that he continued to abuse other children?

JOHN WINGATE: I think you have a moral responsibility to respect my wishes and follow the procedure I've given you and that is to contact the Watchtower Society of Australia. Don't harass me.

REPORTER: Every child in this photograph with Simon Thomas was abused by Robert Souter. As we now know, the total number Souter molested could be as high as 40.

SIMON THOMAS: I think all of the m c ould have been saved, but I could have been saved myself because I found out that one of the sisters in the congregation had spoken to an elder and said that she'd seen Robert Souter doing something to HER son and this was before Robert Souter abused me.

PREACHER: Remember our hearts and minds are dedicated to Jehovah and we must be holy because he is holy.

REPORTER: We asked the Watchtower Society a series of questions about its handling of the cases of Robert Souter and Victor Webb and asked them to tell us how many child ab user s they've uncovered in their ranks. We were told it wasn't the business of the media to know, though the church did say very few were elders or those holding positions of responsibility. In this letter, Viv Mouritz, the society's Australian president, declined our request for an interview and said about the claims of Simon Thomas and Natalie Webb -

"My inquiries indicate that the elders involved did not give instructions not to report the abuse to the police".

REPORTER: It's at odds with everything we've heard from a number of sources, including a judge. But on previous form, the congregation will be told our story is the work of Satan.

PREACHER: The media out there, with all its power and its might, it presents human nature in three Ds, three Ds - debauchery of every kind, deception of every kind and demonism of every kind - and we need to be aware of that.

REPORTER: But the authorities and the courts need to be aware of something else, something far more sinister - the church's notion of the truth. In this book 'Insight on the Scriptures', it says here, doesn't it "Lying generally involves saying something false to a person who is entitled to know the truth".

JIM DONALD: Yes.

REPORTER: Would your average judge or magistrate be somebody who was entitled to know the truth?

JIM DONALD: It would be very difficult for a person not to uphold what the society would want. They would back the society, and they would see that as backing Jehovah, in which case, these people, the court, is not entitled to know the truth.

REPORTER: Is not?

JIM DONALD: No. And in that case they would say that's not a lie.

REPORTER: So it's quite possible, given this definition of lying, that a Jehovah's Witness could go before a civil court in this country and lie to their back teeth?

JIM DONALD: Yes.

REPORTER: And this from the man who was once the society's own lawyer.

REV WARRYN STUCKEY: That has always been, as long as I remember, has been Watchtower doctrine, that only those who are entitled to know the truth deserve the truth.

REPORTER: Right, but if they determined that a particular judge or a particular court is not entitled to know the truth, they won't tell the truth?

REV WARRYN STUCKEY: Correct.

REPORTER: Do you recall telling her that she shouldn't go to the police?

MAURICE HADLEY: Not at all.

REPORTER: She says you did?

MAURICE HADLEY: Oh, well that's her word against mine, isn't it?

REPORTER: So who is entitled to know the truth?

MAURICE HADLEY: I mean, who do you think you are anyway? Since when have you become the bees knees on all of this?

REPORTER: So is Vic repentant, is he, is that it?

MAURICE HADLEY: Well, I would like to think so, but that's not for me to judge, is it? That's between him and his God ultimately, is it not?

REPORTER: Him and his God?

MAURICE HADLEY: Well, don't you think that?

PREACHER: Brothers, as we continue to pray for help in controlling our sinful inclinations, we will see Jehovah help us.

REPORTER: Leave it to Jehovah, the constant refrain of those who purport to live in the truth and see themselves as his only true representatives. Their victims want them brought to account in the world, an official investigation into the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society.

NATALIE WEBB: It needs reform forced on it and waiting for Jehovah just doesn't work.

JIM DONALD: I think it needs to have the lid taken off, yeah, because young kids' lives are being ruined.

REPORTER: So it's time that governments cracked down on this organisation?

NATALIE WEBB: Oh, definitely, mm. I'd hate to think how many children are being abused now.

REPORTER: Even as we speak?

NATALIE WEBB: As we speak.

SIMON THOMAS: I find it hard, even though there are beautiful people within the Jehovah's Witnesses - a lot are still my friends - I find it extremely difficult to have a bond and to be a part of a brotherhood with them now. The organisation - the organisational procedures need to change because kids cannot suffer like that anymore. It's wrong.